

Car Phones Arriving on GB Scene

By KEITH GOLDSCHMIDT
Press-Gazette Staff Writer

There might not be enough work to keep one Wisconsin Telephone Co. employee busy installing car telephones in Green Bay, but the day is coming when almost anyone might be able to afford them.

"We haven't even touched the surface," said John Piombroek, Green Bay area Motorola market sales manager, a seller of private systems.

Len Boscarine, a Motorola spokesman from its corporate office in Illinois, said that within 10 years the costs could be comparable to an in-home phone.

Imagine the possible consequences.

John is on the way to the grocery store when his wife rings his phone. "Dear, I forgot to tell you to pick up a loaf of bread. Don't forget that."

Mary is driving home from work in a rainstorm when her car breaks down. She takes the phone directory from her glove compartment, dials the nearest service station and asks for help without ever getting wet.

For some people, like building contractor Don Zepnick, the future is already here. He uses his mobile telephone between five and 20 times a day.

Recently one of his crews was ready to install doors and windows that had been delivered several days before. But when the order was checked there were no doors. It was 4:30 p.m. on Friday and a trip to a phone would have been too late to get the order before late Monday.

So Zepnick walked to his truck, dialed the company's



number and placed his order, avoiding costly delays.

Despite the image television gives that car telephones are mainly used by private detectives, company executives and other glamour people, it's the everyday worker who is the most frequent owner.

More and more people like Zepnick are looking to mobile telephones as a way to increase efficiency and lower operating costs.

"The small, one-man operation with no secretaries or answering service, such as television repair, is our best type of customer," said Frank Harper, staff manager for Wisconsin Telephone's products management.

Their products have been on the market since 1974, and sales statewide have increased 15 percent in the last year. Local telephone representatives don't report the same growth, but Green Bay's two air channels for

public telephone use are becoming crowded.

Harper said Wisconsin Telephone is considering adding a third channel so people don't get as many busy signals in the area.

Building contractors, real estate salesman, service people like plumbers and other on-the-road sales representatives are some of the more steady customers.

"Just see how much time you spend driving and then how much work you can get done in a car," Boscarine said.

Mobile telephones are popular with building contractors because they can order material without leaving a construction site or handle calls on the job. Without that, they might have to spend hours at night returning calls from their homes.

What the telephones do is transform a person's car into his office. But they

aren't cheap.

To rent a unit from the telephone company costs \$96 a month or about \$120 for the deluxe unit. That includes one hour of free air time. If the call is long distance, the person also pays the normal long distance charge. After the first hour of air time, the customer is charged 29 cents for each minute.

Another option, for those who intend to use the unit a long time, is to purchase the telephone equipment from a private firm and then pay about \$24 a month for using the telephone lines. That includes the free hour of air time.

Units range in price from about \$2,400 to \$2,800 and can be purchased from several firms. Boscarine doesn't expect the telephones to drop in price like pocket calculators did, but the price should remain stable while the electronic equipment improves.

Dennis Dal Santo from Dal Santo Communications Inc., which sells and services portable and mobile telephones, said the portable, hand-held units are more popular because they can be purchased for about \$850. He does install some car telephones though.

More businesses are turning to what Dal Santo calls a "private private" system which uses a two-way radio that can be hooked up to the phone lines.

On that system, a person adds a call-forwarding feature on his telephone which relays the call to his radio in the car. The person can also call out on the line but saves the air time cost since he is using the land phone lines.

That type of system could be installed for about \$1,000 plus the cost of a two-way radio. The air signals are then broadcast on frequencies assigned by the Federal Communications Commission for private use.

Piombroek said that type of system would be more expensive for a person with only one mobile unit but may be more cost effective for a company with three or more mobile units.

The mobile calling system has been improved since the days a person needed to go through an operator for every call. Now a person has a hand set just like a home phone, only he uses extra digits before making the calls. On newer phones, the asterisk and pound symbol are often used for connecting with an air wave transmitter.

The state is serviced by two computer centers in Appleton and Milwaukee which automatically route the calls, Harper said. Each station services eight cities, with Green Bay being serviced by the one in Appleton. That also reaches as far west as Eau Claire.

Other phone companies also have mobile hookups, so there are few areas in the state where a person with a car phone cannot be reached. The only catch is that a person calling must know where

that person is to complete the call.

Each city sends its signal only about 17 to 20 miles, so a person driving from Green Bay might not be reached through the Green Bay station but could be reached through the Appleton station.

The person with the car telephone can dial any number direct without operator assistance, providing he is within range of a radio tower. The deluxe sets — which include push button calling, a memory bank that stores 10 numbers and automatically dials them when asked, and a last-call feature which permits a person to recall a number that has a busy signal without redialing — is the most popular.

Harper said that since the telephone company offered that style, a basic unit with a normal dial has not been purchased.

Zepnick has the deluxe set with several other options. When he is away from his truck, he pushes a button so that, when a call comes in, his truck horn tells him he has a call. He also has a remote speaker which allows him to monitor the progress of his call without putting the phone to his ear. He can hear dial tones when the system automatically locks into an open channel, the phone ringing and the answering voice.

When the call progresses that far, Zepnick first takes the phone off the hook. Harper said the convenience features on the deluxe model are also safety related, because drivers can focus attention on driving rather than placing a call.

Zepnick purchased his unit in January and estimates it will pay for itself in increased work efficiency by the end of summer. Last month he was on the telephone for four hours.

Piombroek estimates Zepnick's unit costs between \$4 and \$6 for each workday it is used. That is based on a five-year payback system for the initial investment.

"One nice thing that we noticed is that if the truck don't start, there is enough power for the radio," Zepnick said. Several times during the bitter cold last winter, trucks didn't start, but it took only a phone call from inside the cab to receive help.